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ABSTRACT

This booklet was developed to help self-study students develop an appropriate routine. It describes steps that many self-study students have used to finish all types of courses in a reasonable length of time and to excel academically in them. The material identifies how the student can control each lesson and the entire course, master material, and complete assignments and examinations well. The booklet stresses a positive attitude, well-completed initial assignments, a sound routine, the right atmosphere for study, preparing a realistic study plan, regular contact with the instructor, and continuous preparation for the final examination. (KC)

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Making The Grade

A How-To Guide for Completing Self-Study Courses

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Introduction

We are providing you with this booklet because you decided to undertake academic work through self-study. We encourage you to read this booklet before beginning any of the assigned material. By reading the following material and by developing a routine designed to increase the habit of self-study, you will significantly increase your chances for successfully completing the course.

This booklet contains steps that many self-study students have used to finish all types of courses in a reasonable length of time and to excel academically in them. Instructors who work regularly with self-study students point out that these steps increase motivation and provide experiences that encourage the tenacity which is central to course completion. With this information, we hope you can develop a routine appropriate for your self-study.

This routine is particularly important to you, the self-study student, because you will not have the impetus to organize the study time that results from class meetings and the support of fellow students. Working alone, and with many other responsibilities, you may be tempted to postpone starting a lesson. This delay can cause you to fall so far behind that finishing seems impossible. A self-study course, although guided by an instructor and his or her material, must be controlled on a lesson-by-lesson basis by you, the student. The following material identifies how you can (a) control each lesson and the entire course, (b) master material, and (c) complete assignments and examinations well.

In this booklet, you will learn why

- a positive attitude is crucial to success in independent study;
- well-completed initial assignments increase the likelihood you will complete the course;
- a sound routine for working on assignments will enable you to concentrate more effectively, to understand material, to prepare assignments, and to organize for the final examination;
- the right atmosphere or environment where you can work without interruption is important to staying with realistic study plans;
- regular contact with your instructor is important and how to establish, to maintain, and to benefit from it; and
- continuous preparation for the final examination is necessary in an independent study course.

Develop a Positive Attitude. Begin the course by emphasizing that you have an opportunity to learn material on your own *and* with the personalized assistance of an instructor. Recognize that working alone will be a

challenge, but recall other challenges you have faced in school that required you to work alone. Identify how you set up a schedule to finish a major paper or class project.

The same discipline you used on those occasions will work for an independent study course. Material can be read, assignments reviewed, and requirements met through steady effort. As you look ahead at what remains to be done, remind yourself of what already has been completed. Do that every time you sit down to work on a lesson, and your enthusiasm will grow throughout the course.

Complete The Initial Assignments. Research on this factor is clear. If you complete the first two assignments, you are likely to finish the entire course. Read the material the instructor has prepared on how to complete an assignment, noting especially the time involved. Set a deadline for completing the first assignment based on the schedule the instructor recommends. Do the same for the second assignment. When you have finished both, review how realistic the schedule was and use the information to develop a routine for completing the entire course.

Establish a Sound Study Routine. More than anything else, routine is vital to the successful completion of an independent study course. As you will see from the following examples, routine and self-discipline enabled each student to finish on schedule as well as to develop permanently beneficial habits.

Success Examples

- Just before summer vacation began, a university sophomore enrolled in a correspondence course in history. During the summer, he set aside a period every morning to work on the course before going to his part-time job at a local restaurant. Before he began each study session, the student developed a plan for what he wanted to accomplish at that session and was able to reach his goals each day. Not only did he complete the course before summer vacation ended, he also carried his study routine to the campus in the fall and improved his grades substantially.

- A woman in her early thirties wanted to return to college to complete her undergraduate degree begun some years before marriage and family. She did not have the time to attend classes regularly. In addition, she was nervous about competing with younger people. A guided individual study course gave her an opportunity to test herself, to study with a sympathetic instructor, and to reestablish study habits that had been useful to her nearly ten years before. She followed routines similar to the sophomore's, establishing periods that would be devoted strictly to the course and telling herself how

much that routine led to accomplishment. Because of her success, she was enthusiastic about beginning an undergraduate program leading to the long-sought degree.

- A busy engineer who wished to improve his writing enrolled in a guided individual study course in English. Although he was on the move a great deal, he committed himself to at least two hours each day for the course. To maintain enthusiasm, he mentally connected the routine to any early improvements in his writing. In addition, this engineer enjoyed the challenge of assignments and found them to be a stimulating break from his regular duties. He not only finished the course and improved his writing, but he also began to use some of his improved self-discipline to manage time more effectively.

- An athlete at a major university enrolled in a guided individual study accounting course to meet a degree requirement in a way that fit her schedule of regular practices and many away-from-campus meets. She found that a study period before practice sessions along with a plan to study while away from campus enabled her to complete her assignments. She consistently used 30- to 45-minute periods of time for study and found that because of her regular work, the accounting assignments were easy to master and to finish on schedule.

These four individuals succeeded in self-study for a number of reasons. They all began with the belief they would complete the material and would do so by establishing a logical completion routine. Their routines included

- setting aside time each day to work on the course for at least an hour;
- locating a quiet work place where concentration was likely and interruptions infrequent;
- preparing a realistic study plan;
- organizing and keeping course material together to cut down on time needed to find books and papers; and
- establishing a goal for each study session, one that increased the motivation to move ahead each time.

Set Realistic Completion Time

You should begin the first lessons with the idea that they will be finished in a period you feel is realistic, given your schedule and other responsibilities. Illustration 1 contains a sample guide for planning an initial routine to cover material in one of your lessons and to complete the required assignment. With this routine, you can learn how much time doing one or more assignments will require. Enough time can be set aside so that you progress slowly and steadily, avoiding last minute completion pressure. Using this routine, you have a chance to check, change, and refine your work before sending in an assignment to the instructor for review and grading. Needless to say, this step is important if you are to establish a record of excellence.

ILLUSTRATION 1. PLANNING AN INITIAL ROUTINE

Consider the following steps in developing a routine for assignment completion:

1. Collect all the material you will need to complete the assignment—books, paper, calculator, reference texts.

2. Read the assignment directions and underline the key parts.

3. Write down the order of activities you intend to use to complete the assignment and how much you feel can be accomplished at the first session.

4. Focus your attention on just one part of the overall assignment, record your starting time, and then begin work.

5. At the end of 30 minutes, stop and review how much you have accomplished, whether reading, solving problems, or preparing answers.

6. Review how much you accomplish at 30- to 40-minute intervals during the rest of the first study session.

7. Determine how much time was required for the total assignment.

8. Plan future study sessions taking into account how long it will take to complete individual assignments.

In addition to concentrating on excellence, you should emphasize your ability to complete the course and to reward yourself for all progress made. Think about how different distant learning is from most of your educational experience. You are working along, sending material to an instructor you've not seen, *and* studying basically new material. Completing the course is an accomplishment in itself, because according to national statistics, many who enroll in self-study courses lack necessary staying power and the will to complete a course. Successful completion, although difficult, will help you become a more self-confident, independent learner, better able to assume responsibility for your own education.

Establish a Working Atmosphere

As a self-study student, you probably have many additional responsibilities occupying your time and thoughts. If these responsibilities are within sight as you attempt to study, you could easily find your concentration shifting to them and then spend valuable time worrying about what remains to be done apart from the course. As a consequence, time set aside for completing a particular lesson won't be enough to accomplish as much as you had hoped.

To avoid distraction, work in an atmosphere that allows you to relax, to feel protected from interruptions, and to become thoroughly immersed in the material. Your study area should be conducive to study, away from a telephone and other disruptions.

Your work space should be adequate to hold all of your material and indeed, to allow some of it to spread out. But it shouldn't become a collecting station so that you feel overwhelmed by additional books, papers, and related items. Your chair should be comfortable, the lighting adequate, and the temperature not an irritant.

Prepare a Realistic Study Plan

When you've established the right location, sit down and prepare a plan that identifies what you will address at this study session. Illustration 2 contains two examples of what self-study students consider a realistic plan. Don't try to attempt too much, for you will cause yourself frustration or will fail to reach difficult goals. Start off by attempting less and by finding out how long it takes to complete certain portions of your lesson or an entire assignment. You can always increase the amount attempted it you find doing more is possible. Be sure to give yourself the opportunity for success by setting realistic goals.

ILLUSTRATION 2. TWO STUDY SESSION PLANS

(Approximately two hours of relatively uninterrupted time)

HISTORY III - History of Western Civilization to 1660

1. Read chapter one in assigned text, underlining key points.
2. Prepare definitions for terms on page 11 of syllabus in a form useful for review during the course and before the final examination.
3. Select four essay topics based on chapter one information and prepare an outline for your answers for each.

ACCOUNTANCY 101 - Principles of Accountancy I

1. Read chapter one in assigned text and underline key points.
2. Finish problems to work and check.
3. Begin problems to work and submit.

Using the following suggestions, you are now ready to heighten your concentration and to finish each study session with some definite accomplishments.

1. As the study session begins, look at the plan you've developed and think about how pleasant your accomplishment of the plan will be. For example, visualize several pages of notes or a partially completed assignment.
2. Take a moment to relax as a way of distancing yourself from other concerns. Tell yourself that for the next two hours (or whatever length of time you've set aside) only the assignment will hold your complete attention.
3. By reviewing the previous lesson before starting a new one, you build momentum and refamiliarize yourself with the course. In effect, you are warming up, similar to an athlete before competition. By doing this at the beginning of the study session, you are more likely to identify key concepts in more than one lesson; you also are better able to integrate material into your own frame of reference and experience. Examples of how to use historical information, accounting principles, or a previously learned math solution will begin to occur to you because of your previous work.
4. As you read course material, stop and analyze concepts being presented in the text or workbook. Consider why the material is important and how its understanding will lead to successful course completion.

5. Direct yourself to complete certain tasks before you take any break, for example, reading a certain number of pages, summarizing a chapter, outlining an assignment, or answering one or two questions.

Pay Attention to Road Signs

Your instructor may provide road signs to focus attention, to identify key concepts, to emphasize certain material, or to summarize information just presented. Pay particular attention to the following signs:

- Marginal notations that often summarize a particular topic
- Topical headings setting off sections of the course guide or text
- Different typefaces that indicate especially important material
- Graphics or charts that illustrate points being made
- Self-check questions at key points in the material designed to test your understanding
- List of important concepts provided at logical points in the course guide

Determine Lesson Completion Times

Each lesson in an independent study course is roughly equivalent to one week of in-class work, three hours of lecture-discussion in class, and the homework assigned for the week. Completion of any lesson varies, of course, according to how you do academic work. Factors such as the complexity of the material, your reading speed, and your rate of concentration are involved along with many others.

One traditional rule of thumb is to study two hours for every one hour of class time. Translating this rule to an independent study course context means studying nine hours for each lesson. In that time you would complete all the reading, studying, and writing for the lesson. Generally speaking, nine hours of work per lesson is a sensible amount of time to use for planning your study, particularly at the beginning of a course. You can always adjust the amount of time as you get involved in the course.

If you are not at all familiar with the subject material, you probably should allow more time for the first lessons because you will most likely have to become familiar with a new vocabulary and new concepts.

Different types of subject material require different amounts of time for completing lessons because of the different types of thinking and writing involved. Using nine hours per lesson as an average, the following list suggests average completion times for different subjects.

ILLUSTRATION 3. LESSON COMPLETION TIMES

Subject Area	Average Lesson Completion Time
• Math	10-12 hours
Reading assignments tend to be shorter with more time devoted to solving problems. If your math background is weak, allow for more time.	
• English	12-15 hours
Literature courses involve much reading and writing.	
• Science	10-12 hours
These courses usually have many new concepts to learn and can involve complex problems to solve.	
• Psychology	9-10 hours
In these courses, reading and study time is usually greater than the time needed for completion of assignments since the questions are frequently the objective, short-answer type.	
• History	12-15 hours
Reading assignments tend to be long, and writing assignments typically involve a number of essay or short-answer questions.	
• Business Administration	9-10 hours
Reading and studying the material requires the most time. Assignment questions tend to be short-answer or objective type.	

Make Contact With Your Instructor

Those instructors who choose to teach self-study courses generally enjoy the opportunity to work with individuals. They are not deterred by the lack of personal contact and usually apply a great deal of effort to interpreting and grading student lessons. However, they must be made aware of any special problems or questions you have as early as possible.

questions or if aspects of the course are not clear. Make these contacts before you attempt any assignment so that you can build confidence from understanding the material and from knowing what you are expected to do.

If you are unclear about the requirements of an assignment, ask before starting off on the wrong path. Candor with an instructor is best. When you can't complete a portion of or an entire lesson, contact the instructor by mail or phone. Then follow his or her advice. For example, you may be told to send in the partially completed assignment or to attempt all parts.

Provide Explanations and Reveal Thought Processes

In courses where problems are to be solved, instructors suggest you show all work and add explanations. The more of the thought process involved in the problem solving you reveal, the better your instructor can understand what you did and why. There usually is more than one way to solve a problem. With an explanation provided, your instructor can analyze the methods used, accept them, or suggest alternatives or amplification.

In courses where your opinion is required, such as history or political science, instructors advise you to attach explanations of your thinking. They also emphasize the importance of clearly written assignments, those definitely beyond the first draft stage, as well as references to support positions taken.

Submit Clearly Written Work

Typing or neat, clear writing helps the instructor concentrate on providing an evaluation of your work. Don't distract your instructor with an assignment that is difficult to read or interpret. If available, a personal computer helps in the preparation of assignments because of the ease of revision.

Value Constructive Criticism

Your returned assignments will contain some criticism, perhaps a great deal. If you remember the following about instructor comments, their words may appear less as criticism and more as helpful suggestion.

- Instructor's comments are meant to show where improvement is needed, with the belief it is possible.
- Phrases such as "good job" or "well-done" may be compliments, given the writing style of the instructor.
- Instructors may omit parts of an explanation which could make their meaning clearer. Don't be afraid to ask them about the meaning of their comments.

Finally, you may not agree with an instructor's comment. With the next lesson, you can raise a question or ask for further detail. All of these activities are part of that important dialogue you establish with the instructor.

Experienced instructors are sensitive to the difficulties individuals can face while attempting to work alone. You will have to take the initiative to obtain assistance or clarity, and the sooner you take it, the more likely you will develop a better working relationship with your instructor.

Prepare For Exams

All courses have exams. A final examination may account for 50 percent of your grade in the course, sometimes more.

You will take the examination in a preselected location under the same conditions residential students experience. Preparing for both should go on incrementally as you complete individual assignments. Given other responsibilities, you may not have a great deal of extra time to study for hours just before the examination.

If you were attending this course on-campus, your preparation might include one or two study sessions with fellow students, or the instructor might conduct a review session. Now you're preparing alone and should take extra time in advance to be fully ready.

Remain In Control

By reviewing material presented in each assignment and by preparing examination notes, you remain in control. Control means you are not overwhelmed by the amount of work being presented. Regular review builds confidence and increases your readiness to take the examination. Study sessions before the exam can be devoted to sharpening understanding, rather than learning material for the first time.

Organize To Succeed

Organize to succeed with a self-study course need not be difficult. In fact, a simple system that helps you finish work on schedule is more likely to be used regularly than a complicated one. For example, the students described earlier used uncomplicated systems. However, they had one other important element— a positive attitude, based on a determination to succeed and a commitment to a system which made success possible. If you begin believing that you will not only finish but excel, this experience will be a pleasant one, ending with increased knowledge as well as a grade of which you can be proud.